1 History of Modern Acupuncture Research in China

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Summary This chapter will review the history of modern acupuncture research in China. The concept of “channels” and “collaterals” has been used for a long time in the traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). Clinical acupuncture yields therapeutic effects on many diseases, according to the general principles of “channels” and “collaterals”. In the past 5 decades, acupuncture research has been very popular in many major Chinese medical institutions, among which Shanghai Medical College of Fudan University (formerly Shanghai First Medical College, and then, Shanghai Medical University) has made substantial contribution to this field. Comprehensive scientific data obtained from normal subjects, patients, and animals have shown that needling of acupuncture points activates the afferent fibers of the peripheral nerves to elicit the De-Qi sensation, and subsequently, the nerve-mediated signals ascend to various levels of the central nervous system (CNS), producing analgesic effect. The pain relief is the most effective outcome of acupuncture treatment. As acupuncture enhances the analgesics’ effect of pain relief, the combination of acupuncture with small doses of analgesic drugs is now being adopted in the management of various types of pain and surgical anesthesia. In addition, clinical and bench studies on acupuncture therapy of other neurological diseases, such as epilepsy, cerebral ischemia, neuroimmune disorders, and woman’s reproductive disorders have also been successfully carried out in the recent years. This chapter will briefly summarize the research progress and present an overall picture of acupuncture research in China.

Keywords acupuncture research, traditional Chinese medicine, history, mechanism, progress

1.1 Acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Medicine

Acupuncture, which originated in China more than 2500 years ago, is an important part of the traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) and is a component of
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the Chinese health care system. It was brought to the Far East (Korea, Japan, etc.) and Southeast Asia in the sixth century, and subsequently, to Europe and the United States in the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries.

According to the ancient Chinese literature (the Suwen of Neijing), early in the primitive society, the primitive stone needle (bian) was employed to treat diseases. With the development of productive forces, bone and bamboo needles appeared. However, after the invention of metal-casting techniques and metal tools, people began to use metal medical needles made of bronze, iron, gold, and silver. At present, stainless steel needles are widely adopted for the treatment (Qian 1986).

By the time of the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States (770 – 221 BC), the theory of Jingluo (channels and collaterals) was established. The ancient classic Huangdi Neijing (Yellow Emperor’s Classics of Internal Medicine) provides a systematic illustration of the points of the channels and collaterals, as well as the theory and methods of acupuncture and moxibustion. The book Zhen-jiu Jiayijing (A – B Classic of Acupuncture and Moxibustion), a classic on acupuncture and moxibustion, was compiled between AD 256 and 260. This book consists of 12 volumes with 128 chapters, depicting 349 acupoints. It describes the locations, indications and manipulations of these points, manipulating techniques and the precautions of acupuncture and moxibustion, and the treatment of common diseases by acupuncture and moxibustion. It is the earliest and the most complete book on acupuncture and moxibustion, and also one of the most influential works in the history of acupuncture and moxibustion.

From the third century to the end of the nineteenth century, new developments took place in the Chinese acupuncture and moxibustion. On one hand, the number of acupuncture points used for treating various diseases greatly increased, and in classification, the “points of the 14 channels” appeared. On the other hand, from the past practice, many vital points were determined, such as Wushu, Shumu, Sizong, and the 12 points used by Mandayang. In particular, the variation of the modes of needling was obvious. Furthermore, the use of filiform needles was a significant development. The theory of acupuncture and moxibustion was continuously enriched and raised to a higher level. In the fourth century, Yancetu, the chart showing the locations of the acupuncture points, was developed, while the ninth century ushered in the blockprinted edition of books on acupuncture and moxibustion. Subsequently, the printed wall-chart illustrating the acupuncture points made its appearance in the seventeenth century.

In 1882, acupuncture and moxibustion faculties in the Imperial Medical College were disbanded by the Qing Dynasty that disdained these medical arts. Further, in 1840, with the invasion of China by the United Kingdom in the wake of the Opium War, western medicine was introduced in China, shoving the TCM to the background. In addition, under the reign of the Kuomintang government, orders were issued to forbid the practice of TCM, and consequently, the development of TCM was inhibited. However, being simple, effective, and rooted in the masses, the practice of acupuncture and moxibustion still prevailed among the people.